4 Witnesses May Recall Iran Data About Gates

Brief Round of Senate Questioning Planned

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The six current and former CIA officials scheduled to appear today before the Senate intelligence committee can testify with firsthand knowledge of CIA Director-designate Robert M. Gates's activities during the Iran-contra affair and other key moments in his career.

Four of them—acting CIA Director Richard J. Kerr, CIA senior analyst Charles E. Allen, former Central American Task Force chief Alan D. Fiers, and former deputy CIA director John N. McMahon—either attended a key meeting with Gates or sent him a memo relating to the scandal. In each case, Gates has testified that he cannot remember the event or the document.

The two others, former deputy CIA director Bobby R. Inman and former top CIA official Thomas G. Polgar, have been publicly debating Gates's qualifications for the top job based on their own dealings with him and their study of his record. Inman, who in 1981 brought Gates to the attention of then-CIA Director William J. Casey, supports his nomination, while Polgar, a retired CIA station chief who led the Senate Iran-contra committee investigation into the CIA's role, opposes Gates.

Gates, in the first two days of hearings on his nomination, has easily handled Iran-contra questions from senators and at this point seems assured of approval when the the hearings conclude.

While today's session could provide the most detailed discussion of Gates's role in the Iran-contra affair, it could also be short and thin. Each committee member will have only 10 minutes to question each witness and only one round of questioning is planned, a committee spokesman said yesterday.

Allen, who worked directly for Gates during 1985 and early 1986, was the key CIA participant in the covert sale of arms to Iran. Fiers, who recently pleaded guilty to withholding information from Congress, was the CIA point man holding together the Nicaraguan contra rebels during the time of the congressional ban on U.S. military support.

Each of the four who worked with Gates can recite a different chapter of the Iran-contra affair.

McMahon, who is scheduled to open the session, was the first of the group to become aware in 1985 of the secret arms-for-hostage dealings with Iran. According to previous Iran-contra committee testimony, McMahon and Gates were present when the matter was discussed in a September 1985 meeting in Casey's office.

Casey spoke about being told by then-national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane that the Israelis had made contact with Iran about a "dialogue" and "release of the [American] hostages," but that the CIA was not to a party to the deal, according to the testimony by Clair E. George, then CIA chief of covert operations.

Gates has told the Senate committee he does not recall this meeting.

Gates has testified that his first knowledge of the covert arms sales came at a Dec. 5, 1985, meeting chaired by McMahon. But Gates has said his only memory of the meeting comes from notes transcribed by McMahon's secretary a year later.

The meeting was held days after a controversial Nov. 24, 1985, Israeli shipment of Hawk antiaircraft missiles to Iran with the assistance of CIA personnel. A year later, the Hawk shipment loomed large in allegations there was a coverup.

Fiers may be asked about yet another meeting Gates has said he cannot remember. It was c alled on the evening of Oct. 9, 1986, it apparently involved a discussion by Casey, Gates, George and Fiers about testimony to be presented on Capitol Hill regarding the shootdown of a contra resupply plane on Oct. 5, 1986. Fiers, who was to accompany George as a backup witness, has said that earlier on Oct. 9, George ordered him to keep his mouth shut about certain aspects of the flight because they would reveal then-White House aide Oliver L. North's central role in the operation.

Gates testified Tuesday that he could not recall the Oct. 9 meeting in Casey's office and had "no recollection" of any discussion to limit the testimony. George is unavailable as a witness, having been indicted earlier this month on 10 felony counts, including three stemming from his testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Oct. 10, 1986.

Fiers, who is cooperating with Iran-contra prosecutors, has been granted immunity from prosecution for his appearance.

Allen had the most extensive dealings with Gates, beginning in late 1985. Initially Allen was assigned by Casey to respond to a request from North to electronically eavesdrop on Manucher Ghorbanifar, the middleman for the arms shipments to Iran and on other key participants. Gates was Allen's boss but has testified he did not know of Allen's assignment at the time.

Allen also could be asked about intelligence supplied to Iran by the CIA as part of the elaborate attempt to win release of American hostages held in Lebanon. Gates, then deputy director for intelligence, assigned Allen to gather the materials for Iran.

In earlier testimony, Allen told the Iran-contra committees that Gates knew more about the 1985 shipments than anyone else in the intelligence directorate. Gates has testified that he knew little about the 1985 Israeli shipments before the scandal became public.

After President Ronald Reagan

authorized U.S. arms sales to Iran in 1986, Allen became concerned that Iran was being overcharged for the weapons and that the surplus might be going to support the contras in Nicaragua. He took his concerns to Kerr, then his boss, and on Oct. 1 to Gates. Gates has testified to this meeting.

But on Nov. 7, Allen wrote a memo to Casey and Gates, reporting that a lawyer for financiers of the U.S. arms shipments was claiming that his clients had been "swindled and that the money paid by Iran for the arms may have been siphoned off to support the contras in Nicaragua."

The CIA located the copy sent to Gates but Gates told the committee he did not recall seeing it before the diversion of funds was publicly announced by Attorney General Edwin Meese III on Nov. 25, 1986.